

INSIDE
THE FIGHT
TO FIX
AMERICA'S
SCHOOLS

Class Warfare

Steven Brill

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To Emily, Sophie, Sam—and Cynthia

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The Race

*January 29, 2009, 1:15 p.m.,
Oval Office, the White House*

As he filed into the Oval Office behind the power players who were already household names in Washington—top presidential adviser David Axelrod, chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan—Jon Schnur thought that he had spent years waiting to have this meeting.* Until now he had been jilted. The Democrats he had worked for had always backed away from the education reforms he championed. And they hadn't been elected.

Schnur, then forty-three, got interested in education when, as an editor of his high school newspaper, he read a draft of an article by a student who had transferred from a Milwaukee public school to his school in the city's suburbs. "She was savvier than any of us on the editorial board, but the draft was just so terribly written," he says. "The more I got to know her, the more I became obsessed with why public education hadn't reached people like her."

After he graduated from Princeton, where he had volunteered as a tutor in a nearby high school, Schnur worked in Bill Clinton's presidential campaign, then landed an education policy job in his administration.

That was when Schnur started to distrust his assumptions about why American public education had collapsed to a point where it was an obstacle to the American dream rather than the enabler. As he studied research trickling in by the late 1990s, he began to believe that failure or success in America's schoolrooms, especially in its poorest communities, didn't depend mostly on what kind

* Unless otherwise noted, thoughts attributed to anyone in this narrative are based on the author's having talked to that person. A full explanation of sources can be found in the Notes section at the back of this book.

support and friendship of American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten. She had been a co-chair of Clinton's first New York senate campaign. Clinton responded to Obama's stance by calling merit pay divisive and insulting to teachers.

A few weeks after Obama's comment in Iowa, Schnur and campaign issues director Heather Higginbottom had presented him with an eight-point education reform platform. Higginbottom, then thirty-eight, had been Senator John Kerry's legislative director and then his issues director in his 2004 presidential run. So she and Schnur were longtime collaborators, and education reform was her favorite issue, too. Perhaps because of the disappointing experience in the Kerry campaign, when education reform had been trumped by the political team's fear of the teachers' unions, they were apprehensive that Obama might cut out or water down one or two of their most union-offending ideas.

Obama signed off on all eight points with little discussion, other than to tell them, "This is what I've been saying for a long time. . . . Just don't poke the unions in the eye with this. No anti-union rhetoric, and keep channels of communication open with them."*

So nothing about this Oval Office session with the new president should have made Schnur nervous. In fact, he was thrilled that eight days into Obama's presidency, amid the fierce economic crisis and other issues that commanded his attention, Obama had reserved a half hour to deal with education. Yet Schnur was nervous anyway, not only because those other Democrats had failed him before, but also because, in terms of its prescriptions for changing K-12 education across the country and how much money it proposed to make that happen, the plan that he, Higginbottom, and Duncan had cooked up was far beyond what any president had ever dared. In a December transition meeting, Obama had signed off more generally on the direction he would follow in education reform. Now it was time for specifics, and the specifics were not conventional.

Schnur had written a three-page memo summarizing how the Obama administration would take the \$800 billion economic stim-

ulus package the president was about to propose and carve out \$15 billion as a jackpot to be divided among ten to fifteen states that won a contest related to education reform. It would be a real contest, with no state able to prevail because of size or political influence. The winners would be states that submitted the best, most credible *specific* plans for using data and student-testing systems to evaluate teachers based on student improvement; for creating compensation and tenure systems for principals and teachers that would be based on their effectiveness in boosting their students' proficiency; for taking over and turning around consistently failing schools; and for encouraging alternatives to traditional public schools—such as charter schools.

The proposed contest had a catchy name: Race to the Top.

Schnur had brought thirty pages of backup material that had been attached to the three-pager when it was sent to the president. But Obama, sitting in a chair opposite his desk to the right of Schnur's sofa, said he had read it and didn't need to go over it again. In fact, Schnur and Higginbottom, who was also at this Oval Office meeting, were delighted to see that the president had underlined the part of the memo—and put a big check mark in the margin next to it—that said that not all states would get the money, just those that deserved it on the merits of their reform plans.

The new president asked the others what they thought. Axelrod, sitting on the couch across from Schnur and Duncan, jumped in and said that the unions would erupt in opposition, which could endanger support for the overall stimulus package among the Democrats whom Obama would need to get it through. This was not the way aid bills were done, Axelrod added, a point that was seconded by Obama's just-appointed congressional liaison. It was a direct assault on congressional prerogatives. The members of Congress would insist that, as with most aid programs and certainly ones involving billions of dollars, every state and congressional district should get the money proportionately, rather than have it parceled out to a chosen few by the White House or the education secretary. The unions would fan the flames on that, he added, reminding powerful senators and representatives, who chaired the relevant committees and were the unions' traditional allies and recipients of campaign support, that their states or districts might get nothing.

* Quotations of conversations are based on the recollections of those who were present. In situations where the recollections are not explicit, quotation marks are not used, and the conversations are paraphrased.

Schnur and Duncan knew that many of the states that were home to influential Democrats on Capitol Hill, particularly California but also Wisconsin and New York, were unlikely to win any contests related to education reform unless a booby prize was awarded. Duncan, an education reformer who had gotten to know Obama because he had been running Chicago's school system until his appointment to the cabinet, kept that thought to himself. This was a singular opportunity for the president to act on something he cared a lot about, he told Obama.

Schnur—who is deferential and soft-spoken, even when he is the person in the room who knows the most, as he often is—spoke haltingly to the new president. He said he thought they could overcome any opposition on the Hill because this was only \$15 billion in an \$800 billion package and because there was such goodwill, on the Democratic side, at least, toward the new president.

Although he did not volunteer it, Schnur knew that George Miller, the senior Democrat in the House on education issues, would support the contest. Schnur had already checked with him.

Miller had long been out of sync with the teachers' unions and more traditional Democrats on education reform, in part because of his experience as a volunteer at a hard-pressed school in his California district. "We shouldn't just write checks," Miller had told Schnur. "We should make them do something for it."

As a congressman, Emanuel had co-authored a book the year before on domestic policy, in which he touted education reform of the kind Schnur was now pushing. And as the incoming chief of staff he had on more than one occasion good-naturedly egged on domestic policy aide Higginbottom with whispers of "education reform, education reform" when they passed in the halls at the Chicago transition office. "You don't get any do-overs in education; you get one shot to succeed or fail with a kid, and our schools were mostly failing," Emanuel says, explaining his passion for the issue.

Now Emanuel butted in, saying, "We've got to do this. It's a great plan. . . . This is our great opportunity. And I know we can get a lot of Democrats to support it."

The boss seemed to have made up his mind. "Yes, let's do it," Obama said. "I always say this is supposed to be about the kids, not the adults."

"Just make sure," the president added, repeating what he'd told Schnur and the others in Iowa, "that we don't poke the unions in the eye with this. Just do what we have to do."

With that decision, Obama unleashed a swirl of forces whose ferocity would exceed anything even Schnur expected. Parents would march in Los Angeles and Tallahassee demanding the reforms the contest prescribed. The "Race" and education reform would become defining issues in elections from Florida to Colorado to the District of Columbia. Key laws and regulations would be changed in Michigan, Louisiana, Nevada, Tennessee, and thirty other states.

Indeed, something unusual broke out across America: a substantive policy debate that engaged a broad swath of the citizenry and their elected officials in villages, cities, state capitals, and in Washington—and that actually produced results.

All of that happened because the contest for the stimulus money became a call to arms for a snowballing network of education reformers across the country—an unlikely army of non-traditional urban school chiefs, charter school leaders, researchers at think tanks who were producing data about how teaching counted more than anything else, philanthropists and hedge-fund billionaires who ate up the data, fed-up parents, and a growing corps of unconventional Democratic politicians. Having worked for years in cities and towns across the country, almost unnoticed except among education bureaucrats, they now sprang up and took center stage. Schnur, a behind-the-scenes player, seemed to be at the center of the network. Everyone seemed to know him, even people who didn't know each other.

At the same time, the Race to the Top became a call to the barricades for those who had held back the reformers for years with arguments that their theories were simplistic and untested, and that they glossed over the real obstacles of poverty and racism while scapegoating the one group—educators—who really understood the issues and who really cared.

The leader in making that argument would be Randi Weingarten, who was fifty-one when the Race was launched and who would assume an increasingly high national profile in the two years that followed.

A savvy New Yorker whose mother had been an elementary school teacher for twenty-nine years, Weingarten is a talented leader, able and relentlessly eager to make the case that teachers and her American Federation of Teachers are dedicated enablers of children's success, not self-interested impediments. For years she had teased her mother that she had become a lawyer and her sister an emergency room doctor because neither wanted to work as hard as she had seen her mother work.

Schnur's Race to the Top—because it called for a sweeping overhaul of a system where no one had been held accountable, and because it enlisted the nation's school chiefs, mayors, and governors in a “contest” that caught on in the media—would force Weingarten's side to play defense in political arenas that this side had traditionally dominated. The onslaught would become so heavy in so many places that Weingarten would start confiding to friends that she feared her union was destined to meet the fate of the United Auto Workers, which had been crippled when competing, nonunion car-makers almost put Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler out of business by producing better, cheaper cars.

In Weingarten's world, charter schools were to teachers' unions and conventional public schools what Toyota or Honda had been to the autoworkers' union and the big three Detroit automakers. So it especially alarmed her that encouraging the growth of charter schools would be one of the ways a state could score points in the Race to the Top.

First promoted by the Clinton administration in the 1990s, charter schools are publicly financed and open to any child, but they are run by entities other than the conventional local school district. Typically, they are operated by nonprofit organizations that rely on donations to provide seed money to launch the school but then use the same amount, or less taxpayer money per pupil, as is doled out to the public schools for ongoing operations. Those who run charters are accountable for the school's performance. However, they are free to manage as they wish, which includes the freedom to hire teachers who are not union members. Students are admitted based on a lottery; these are public schools with no admissions requirements or any other filters (other than the lottery when applications outnumber seats).

Charters were a relatively minor factor in the plans the states had to present to win the Race to the Top. However, because Weingarten and her side directed so much vitriol at charters, the role of charter schools in the Race to the Top would get more attention than it deserved. The Obama plan was not about charter schools. Nor is this book about charter schools, except insofar as charters illuminate larger points in the overall battle over public education.

By 2009, out of 95,000 American public schools, fewer than 5,000 were charter schools. So they are unlikely in the short term (or even in the long term) to replace a significant portion of traditional public schools. The larger issues around education reform have to do with how the traditional public schools, run by the government, can be changed. That is why Schnur's Race to the Top would award only a fraction of the points necessary for a state to be one of the winners based on how much or little the state encouraged charters. The most points would go to states that demonstrated commitments to systemic reforms intended to improve their government-run public schools.

Nonetheless, school reformers like Schnur like to point to charters as the experiments that prove the case for those systemic reforms. They argue that the larger significance of charter schools is that the ones that work not only demonstrate that children from the most challenged homes and communities can learn but also suggest how traditional public schools might be changed to make them operate effectively. It can make for an especially compelling argument when a charter school and a traditional urban public school are operating side by side in the same building.

Juicy Words

*December 7, 2010, 7:45 a.m., Lenox Avenue
between 117th and 118th Streets, Harlem, New York City*

Just before 8:00 on the morning of December 7, 2010, Jessica Reid—a blond, twenty-eight-year-old “leadership resident,” the term used for assistant principal at the Harlem Success Academy I charter school—finished supervising breakfast. Wearing an outfit more likely to be seen at a downtown club, Reid circulated the room and complimented several children for having completed reading another book. A small pink notebook in hand, Reid headed off through the silent hallways now filling up with four hundred of Harlem’s children, on her way to the first of five observations of the eleven fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade classes she oversees. She would observe the other six tomorrow. Reid observes every class at least twice a week, all year, unless she spots particular weaknesses that require her to drop in more often.

In all cases she’ll e-mail notes, send text messages, or have quick hallway conversations with the teachers she supervises, going over what she thinks they’re doing right or what they need to improve. Today’s critiques ranged from the relatively trivial—“You should remember to put the book down when you stop reading out loud in order to make eye contact” and “Stop after each stanza and ask them to make a mental movie of Paul Revere about to ride”—to the more substantive: “Do you think we need to go back over compound fractions?”

Reid interrupted the notes she was taking to prepare these mini-critiques and leaned over to tuck one girl’s uniform blouse into her skirt, after which she asked her, in a whisper, what had happened to her underwear. She complimented a boy about his shoulders-back posture, then praised another for making “total eye contact” with the teacher throughout the lesson.

At 11:00, Reid headed into a classroom to do some teaching her-

self. Two weeks before, she had forced out one of her new fifth-grade English teachers. Although the new teacher had come to Harlem Success in August with good credentials, Reid had concluded, having watched her since school had started in August, that she had “pitied the kids rather than pushed them.”

It wasn’t a hunch. Because Harlem Success monitors each child’s progress week by week, Reid had seen that many of this teacher’s students weren’t completing their assigned reading. Worse, the scores the teacher was giving them on tests were higher than Reid’s sense of how they had been doing in class when she looked in on them and their teacher every day or two. Thus her judgment that pity was replacing push.

And then there was the classroom itself, which looked fine to me but to Reid was sloppy and had few of the charts, posters, and other accoutrements that she and the other powers that be at Harlem Success believed were essential.

So the week before Thanksgiving, Reid and the new fifth-grade teacher, who was maybe four years younger than Reid, had agreed that she and Harlem Success were not a good fit.

Now Reid was going to take her place in class for the rest of the year, on top of supervising the ten other third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade classes in the school. It would be exhausting, she knew, and would further upset what had become her increasing effort to achieve some balance in her life, “so I don’t get a divorce or end up in a state of total collapse,” she told me. Reid had worked her way through UCLA doing personal training for two or three hours before classes and in the evening after class, and working out had always been a cherished ritual. Now she rarely got to the gym except on weekends, and her husband (they were married two years earlier), who worked in the insurance business, was complaining that she was always either working or thinking about work.

The intensified regimen began over Thanksgiving weekend, when Reid had to hang up the “juicy words” in her class. At Harlem Success, these are words that are more expressive than the easier alternatives. Words that improve a child’s vocabulary. Words that send the message that these kids can reach higher. *Stout* or *corpulent* instead of *fat*. *Tedious* or *mundane* instead of *boring*. *Emaciated* instead of *thin*.

It had driven Reid crazy that the dismissed teacher had ignored

her repeated requests to get this stuff hung up all over the classroom. So the Saturday after Thanksgiving, Reid had come uptown into the building to put up charts she had hand-drawn showing sixteen common words, each with at least four juicy alternatives. She also put up charts spelling out "Writing Expectations" for her fifth graders (depicting various rules of grammar and the basics of a winning topic sentence) and "Idioms We Are Studying" ("going against the grain," "marches to the beat of his or her drum," "on thin ice").

Standing in front of her new class in black stiletto heels, a black and pink crinoline dress, and a black, gold-buttoned jacket not quite covering five different bracelets, Reid called on them, one by one, to line up at the door. Then she marched all twenty-two out into the hall to look at the "Writing Up a Storm" bulletin board. These were displays of personal essays done under the tutelage of the teacher Reid had just replaced.

"Look at it," she said. "What do you notice?"

"It's pretty empty," whispered one tiny girl in glasses.

"Yes, that's right, isn't it," Reid replied. "And think of the irony that it says 'writing up a storm.' Just seven out of forty-six fifth-grade scholars have their essays up there, and some of them have grammatical mistakes and misspellings.

"I sat up last night and realized that the most heartbreaking part," she continued, "was the number of scholars who did not turn in their work, and the number that did whose work was too short or riddled with errors.

"The worst part," she added, "was that last week I said I would edit these for you if you asked, and in the entire grade only two scholars asked for their work to be edited. That tells me you don't even care."

Several of the children shifted nervously on their feet. Most looked embarrassed. "Those of you who know me know that I am the most stubborn person you will ever meet," Reid concluded. "I'll do whatever it takes to make you a good writer, because you'll never get into college if you can't write. So we're going to have extra writing homework every night. . . . You're going to rewrite your paragraphs until they have correct capitalization and punctuation, because when you create a piece of writing that has errors you're

sending the message that you're not intelligent. Why would you do that to yourself? I know you're intelligent. Remember, I'm not looking for perfection. I'm really not. I'm just looking for effort, because I know you can succeed."

Reid had them file back into class, where the lesson was about writing a personal essay depicting an important person in their lives. She shifted to an electronic whiteboard to list the bullet points of the person she had chosen to write about—her mother, who is also a teacher, in California. She then put an essay on the whiteboard that she had drafted the night before. It transfixed the children.

Reid's story began by noting that her mother, with "her Swedish face, blue eyes, and blond hair," looks just like herself. Then came a stunning recollection: Her father not only "broke my mother's heart," but because of her parents' divorce, Reid, her mother, and Reid's two siblings had to live on welfare while her mother went back to school to get a teaching degree.

Two weeks later there would be forty-four pieces of nearly flawless writing on the board outside, and Reid had hung 3-D images of clouds from the ceiling above it (accompanied by pencils made to look like raindrops) because, she would tell her students, "You now really are writing up a storm."

Harlem Success Academy I is part of a network of seven Harlem Success charter schools in New York. It is in a forty-three-year-old brick building on Lenox Avenue between 117th and 118th streets that it shares with PS 149, a traditional public school that has 433 students spread through kindergarten to eighth grade. (Harlem Success has 631 in grades K-5.)

The schools are separated only by a fire door in the middle and some staircases. They share a gym and cafeteria. In one wing of the third floor, the schools are separated by only a dividing line down the middle of the hall. On one side, the trim above the classroom doors and along the walls is painted standard city Department of Education black. On the other side, there's the Harlem Success trademark orange and blue.

Across the hall and one floor down from where I watched Reid coach her kids on essays, juicy words, and personal biographies—maybe a fifteen-second walk—I looked in on a goateed teacher in

jeans and a sweatshirt sitting back in a chair in front of eighteen fourth graders. His feet parked on the desk, he bellowed: "How many days in a week?" No answer. Half the children had their heads down. Most of the others were chattering away, except for two boys who were wrestling on the floor. The teacher asked again, louder. Still no answer. Then louder still, all the while rocking almost to the point of falling over backward in the chair. Then, "Okay, let's move on to something else."

Outside, some children wandered the halls, while those moving from class to class did so boisterously, as if in the schoolyard. On the first floor, about forty kids were in the auditorium watching what seemed to be an action movie.

The Harlem Success teachers' contract drives home the idea that the school is about the children, not the grown-ups. It is one page, allows them to be fired at will, and defines their responsibilities no more specifically than that they must help the school achieve its mission. Harlem Success teachers are paid about 5 to 10 percent more than union teachers on the other side of the building who have their levels of experience.

The union contract in place on the public school side of the building is 167 pages. Most of it is about job protection and what teachers can and cannot be asked to do during the 6 hours and 57.5 minutes (8:30 to about 3:25, with 50 minutes off for lunch) of their 179-day work year.

Reid and her teachers start work at about 7:45 and finish at 4:30 to 5:00. Their school year begins in August, rather than the day after Labor Day, and often they work at tutorials or other special classes on Saturdays.

Reid's teachers must be available by cell phone (supplied by the school) for parent consultations in the evening, as are Reid and the principal. They are reimbursed for taking a car service home if they stay late into the evening to work with students. PS 149 teachers are not obligated to receive phone calls from students or parents at home; some would and many wouldn't, says the school's principal.

The assumption that every child will succeed is so ingrained at Harlem Success that, as happens at many charter networks across the country, each classroom is labeled with the name of the college

attended by its teacher and the year these children are expected to graduate (as in "Yale 2026" for one of the kindergarten classes).

Reid's side of the building spent \$18,378 per student in the 2009–2010 school year. This includes actual cash outlays for everything from salaries to the car service, plus what the city says (and the charter school disputes) is the value of services that the city contributes to the charter for utilities, building maintenance, and even "debt service" for its share of the building.

It costs \$19,358 per year to educate each student on the public side of the building, or \$980 more than on the charter side. That's right. The public school spends more per student than the charter school.

One reason is that instead of the standard matching pension contributions paid to the charter teachers that cost the school \$193 per student, the teachers on the PS 149 side have a pension plan that is now costing the city \$2,605 per year per pupil.* All fringe benefits, including pensions and health insurance, cost \$1,341 per student on Reid's side but \$5,316 on the PS 149 side. Union teachers can get up to thirteen paid sick or personal days off a year, an amount that is about the same as, or in some cases less than, what most teachers' union contracts across the country specify. At PS 149, the teachers take most of these days; they averaged eight days absent in the 2009–2010 school year. (The other five days are held over for them in an account that they can use in future years or turn into cash when they retire.) These absences—more than one every five weeks of the school year—not only suspend any progress a class might be making; they also cost the school more than \$150 a day for a substitute teacher.

The Harlem Success I teachers were absent an average of 1.1 days.

While the public side spends more, it produces less. PS 149 is rated by the city as doing comparatively well in terms of student achievement, and it has improved since Mayor Michael Bloomberg took over the city's schools in 2002 and appointed Joel Klein as chancellor. Nonetheless, its students are performing significantly behind the charter kids on the other side of the wall. For example,

* The annual cost would be multiples more if the city accounted for and funded the actual future cost of these pensions rather than underfunded it, thereby creating an inevitable financial crisis in the next few years.

in the 2009–2010 school year, 29 percent of the students at PS 149 were doing English language arts (reading and writing) at or above grade level, and 34 percent were grade-level proficient in math. In the charter school, 86 percent were at proficiency (or higher) in English, and 94 percent were at proficiency (or higher) in math; and Reid's third graders tied for top-performing school in the state in math—surpassing such high-end public school districts as Scarsdale, the wealthy Westchester County suburb.

Same building in the same community, with similarly qualified, or challenged, students.* (Remember, the charter students are admitted in a lottery, with seven times as many kids entering the lottery in 2010 as could be admitted.) And the classrooms have almost exactly the same number of students. In fact, the charter school averages a student or two more per class, puncturing the myth that, unless there are extreme differences, smaller classes are the key to student learning.

The principal of PS 149 is Kayrol Burgess-Harper, forty. Burgess-Harper is a former stenographer who got an education degree and became a star math teacher after she realized that secretarial work was a dead end in the digital age. She then graduated from the Leadership Academy that Klein created soon after becoming chancellor in 2002 to train a new breed of principals.

Burgess-Harper, who is cheerful yet hard charging, says that making her school a model of excellence is “nonnegotiable.” She has made significant improvements at the school since taking over in January 2010 after the last principal was removed for misconduct. However, she is the first to agree that her job of boosting achievement for the kids on her side of the building is far harder than Reid's. When I told her about the teacher upstairs from her office I had seen yelling about the days of the week, she seemed to know exactly whom I was referring to.

Burgess-Harper said that, in fact, at least ten of her forty teachers are not effective and that “their attitude and lack of caring

* Union critics of charter schools and their supporters have repeatedly asserted that schools like Harlem Success “skim” from the community's most intelligent students and committed families, or that they teach fewer learning-challenged or impoverished students and fewer students who are English-language learners. None of the actual data supports this.

affects many of the others.” She had rated three of them unsatisfactory in the spring of 2010 and said she expected to give the other seven U ratings in 2011. This means that Burgess-Harper has dared to give, or plans to give, 25 percent of her teachers a U rating in a system that gave that rating to 1 or 2 percent of all teachers before Klein arrived.

However, only a fraction of teachers rated U are ever dismissed, although the rare U rating can block new teachers from getting tenure.

Burgess-Harper explained that as a result of her more aggressive posture, her relationship with the union's representative at PS 149 is “really tense.” In what no one around her half of the building thinks is unrelated, she has been the target of anonymous calls to a city Department of Education investigator's hotline alleging improper behavior. In fact, her official title on the day we met was still only “acting interim principal,” because one of those investigations had not been closed. (She was being questioned about a “conflict of interest” because someone had anonymously reported to the hotline that she had accepted the offer of the daughter of one of her teachers, who is also a friend of hers, to pick up her young daughter at her elementary school across town one day because Burgess-Harper was staying late in the office.) Burgess-Harper's status had been in limbo for more than a year when we met in early 2011, but she said, “I'm not an ‘acting’ anything. I am doing this job.”

“The union does this to principals all the time,” says Klein. “If you do anything to piss them off, they put a hit out on you. They call the hotline or they get parents to complain. It's like the mafia.”*

“There is a whole new attitude here, since Principal Burgess-Harper took over,” says Marie Jones, an assistant principal who began as a reading teacher at PS 149 in 1985. “She wants us out of our offices and into the classrooms.” Nonetheless, neither Burgess-Harper nor her assistants can do the kind of daily coaching and quality control that is routine for Jessica Reid. For starters, Burgess-Harper explains, each assistant has a list of twenty-nine separate

* The UFT representative at PS 149, Patrick Walsh, said he was “not aware of any anonymous calls to the DOE concerning Principal Harper, and I highly doubt that any such calls are coming from teachers. I do know that there is considerable unhappiness among parents about various issues regarding the school,” he added.

administrative chores for which he or she is responsible. Reid's side of the building, despite keeping to a lower overall cost per student in its operating budget, has a business manager and staff to handle all that. More important, says Burgess-Harper, "If we went into a classroom every day, we'd be charged with harassment."

So while Burgess-Harper has made class observations a priority since she took over, she guesses that at most each teacher is observed three or four times a term, although before she became principal teachers were observed only once or twice a year. "You have to do it informally or casually to avoid trouble," she explains, by which she means those complaints of harassment from the union representative in the building, which can take hours of meetings to resolve, or even anonymous calls alleging wrongdoing to the corruption hotline. Under the contract, only one formal observation per term is allowed to count officially for the annual evaluation, and the union representatives typically insist that the teacher receive advance notice before that observation takes place.

"Give me the ability to hire and fire the ones I want and give me a school day from eight to five like they have on the other side, and I'd have hundreds of little Einsteins running around here, too," Burgess-Harper says.

Burgess-Harper's realization, and frustration, after little more than a year on the job—that she too could produce those little Einsteins, if she could change the rules and the expectations on her side of the building—is something Jessica Reid understands well.

The Epiphanies

Jessica Reid remembers her first day of work at PS 121 in the Bronx on September 7, 2004, as the worst day of her life.

The spring before, Reid, a native of San Francisco about to graduate from UCLA, had applied to Teach For America (TFA), an organization started in 1990 to recruit high-achieving young adults coming out of prestigious colleges to teach for two years at public schools in underprivileged communities. Although her mother and aunt are educators, Reid had never thought about teaching. But she hadn't thought about much of anything else career-wise either. When she did a mock lesson for the TFA recruiters during her interview, she realized that she was pretty good at it—and she enjoyed it.

Her sense that this was going to be a great adventure was reinforced by her experience at the five-week TFA academy she attended at a Bronx middle school that summer. She and the other new TFA corps members got training from TFA veterans and were also paired with experienced New York City public school teachers to teach kids who were attending summer sessions because they fell behind during the year. The whole thing—being in New York for the first time, teaching troubled kids, even the cavernous brick and cinder-block Bronx school—should have been intimidating. She thought it was a breeze from the moment she'd taught her first lesson and her mentor-teacher quickly blurted out, "You're great. You have a real knack for this."

So all was good until that morning the day after Labor Day when Reid walked into her first real class. There were now twenty-five fifth graders and only Reid at the front of the room, rather than the five or ten kids she'd shared with the experienced teacher that summer. Before she could even tell them her name, some were whistling at her, while others laughed about how she looked so young. ("I actually did look about fourteen then," she concedes.)

When one of the fifth graders, who was a half foot taller than Reid's five feet five inches, stood up and started dancing around, none of the tricks she'd been taught at the TFA academy for regaining the class's attention worked. At lunchtime, Reid went to the principal. He had the instigator removed from the classroom and told her not to worry. The kid was back by the end of the afternoon.

During a break, a few of her fellow teachers shrugged when she told them how bad it had been. One said simply, "Welcome to our world."

For the rest of the day, Reid pleaded fruitlessly with her students to pay attention. She found herself looking at the clock, hoping it would move faster. By 3:15 she was on the subway.

By the next morning on the subway ride back to the Bronx, she had decided that she had to take control. She had to be, as she wrote in an e-mail the next night to an old high school teacher she idolized, "a total bitch." She was going to make sure that they knew that their actions had consequences and that she wasn't going to tolerate their not trying to learn.

She did it in baby steps. The second day maybe she was able to connect for a half hour or so, getting them to discuss a book and begin talking about the essays they might write. Then she got traction for two or three periods, then a whole day. All the while, she'd be on the phone at night with her mother and aunt—or with a kindred-spirit, experienced teacher she had befriended on a subway platform one morning—getting encouragement and coaching tips. When her mom came to visit, her first comment after class was, "Jessica, you never sit down."

"That's right," Reid replied. "To do this right you have to be on the entire time." She'd stay coaching some kids until 5:00 or 6:00, often being the only one left in the building. She'd come home, go over a lesson plan, then collapse, her social life so empty that she took to wearing her party clothes to school so she would be in a better mood.

By the spring, Reid was teaching some of her kids Shakespeare. "I can do this," she thought.

Jessica Reid's epiphany would be experienced in one form or another by many of the people who, as we will see, would end up in the middle of a battle to turn around America's public schools.

Michelle Rhee

As Michelle Rhee was nearing graduation from Cornell in 1992, she happened upon a public television documentary about Teach For America. A few days later she noticed a TFA recruiting flyer. Rhee had tutored one summer at a Native American reservation; she remembered this as a "jarring experience, because everyone had written these kids off." Looking for something meaningful to do until she decided what she really wanted to do with her life, Rhee went for a TFA interview. By the fall, she was teaching math in a middle school in Baltimore. She was failing so miserably to control her class, let alone teach anything, that two officials from the school district who came to observe her hinted, with little subtlety, that Rhee should consider another line of work.

Rhee became obsessed with not giving up and with squeezing the most out of her class day. She even tried ten different methods for saving time when her fifth graders had to sharpen their pencils. (Line them up single file in front of the sharpeners? Double file? Hand out sharpeners?) By the winter, she saw that she was breaking through. Her kids were really learning math, and liking it.

"I just made things up—anything that would work," Rhee recalls. "Anything. I had kids all sit in a giant U, except that any kid who misbehaved had to sit in the middle. . . . I used the calendar to teach math and made up something called incredible equations. If it was October 3, I'd create all these ridiculous equations where the answer was three."

When she finished her first year that June, Rhee went home to Ohio. For the first time since before high school, she didn't take a summer job. She had figured out that the best way to get her kids engaged was through charts and posters and, most important, all kinds of physical objects, such as geometric shapes, play money, or Monopoly-like cards for game playing. She spent the summer preparing all of these study aids so that she would have something for every day of class. She plotted out months of lessons, then took over the basement and began making the materials she needed—a trunkful that she would take back to Baltimore. She used the photocopying machine in her father's office, which was attached to the family's

home, and she recruited two aunts visiting from Korea to help. "We had a little Asian sweatshop going all summer," she remembers.

Soon after Rhee got back to school that fall, the two supervisors who had observed her the year before returned. They were stunned. They had never seen such a turnaround in a teacher's ability to connect with a class, they told her.

Rhee's success was so startling that the school officials asked her to demonstrate her methods to the other teachers. Her colleagues, Rhee says, reacted "with amusement, like 'isn't that cute.' One even said that what I was doing makes too much noise."

As her second year ended, Rhee was so satisfied with her progress that she decided to stay an extra year in Baltimore, where she pushed her classes to still more improvement. However, she recalls, when she left she was "depressed and even furious that these kids were doomed next year because everyone else had the attitude that they couldn't succeed."

The following year, Rhee enrolled in Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, determined to get a credential that would allow her to do something about that.

Dave Levin

Dave Levin, too, had floundered in his first months teaching for TFA, in his case at a mostly Hispanic school in Houston. He and his roommate and fellow TFA recruit, Mike Feinberg, would stay up all night trying to think of ways to break through in their classrooms.

Levin's moment of realization came one warm spring morning in 1993, when he looked out at his sixth-grade class as the students conferred with each other over essays they had written. He had always had empathy for kids others assumed couldn't learn because he'd been forced out of a prestigious Manhattan private school when a learning disability was mistaken for lack of intelligence. He remembers as if it were yesterday the exact moment he watched these children in Houston succeeding—the windows were wide open, the Texas sun was shining in as they edited each other's essays. "Wow," he said to himself. "I'm teaching."

Levin's success was the result, it turns out, not only of his de-

termination to connect with his kids, even if he had to visit them and their parents at home each night, but also of his and Feinberg's eagerness and ability to mimic and expand on the methods being deployed in the classroom across the hall by a veteran Houston teacher, Harriett Ball.

Ball had established, amid a system steeped in failure, an oasis of high expectations and learning, which would forever remind Levin and Feinberg that, whatever the broader failures of public schooling in America, there were thousands of traditional public school teachers—not Ivy League reformers, but young and middle-aged and senior teachers who were members of teachers' unions—who hadn't gotten the memo telling them they were supposed to fail.

Ball took Levin and Feinberg under her wing, showing them how to deploy a tool kit that consisted of lots of songs and rhymes, not the physical objects that Rhee used. Yet in both cases the kit was based on the same mind-set: These children could succeed if you assumed they could, and if you kept trying.

It's a mind-set that Levin and Feinberg were destined to carry with them beyond two classrooms in Houston. Soon they would set out to create the largest and arguably most successful network of charter schools in the country.

Sarah Usdin

After graduating from Colgate in 1991, Sarah Usdin got a prestigious Fulbright Scholarship to teach English in Germany. Her students—in grades five through thirteen (the last precollege grade in Germany) at a rural ski town school designated for pre-Olympians and other athletes—had already passed the country's tests to be on track for university study. So they were a highly motivated, smart group. Teaching them was fun. Because she didn't have a master's degree and a teaching degree, both of which are required in Germany, she was tightly supervised.

A year later, still not sure of a career, Usdin, too, joined Teach For America. That summer, she ended up at the same bare-bones TFA program in South Central Los Angeles where Dave Levin was

getting his training. Because she had grown up in Louisville and wanted to return to a Southern river city, she was one of the few TFA recruits to pick Baton Rouge as her first choice for a job.

Usdin's fifth-grade Baton Rouge class was a world away from her experience in Germany. Her school wasn't the hardest of hard-core inner-city schools that Levin or Rhee faced. Most but not all students were entitled to free lunch, and many of the parents were actively involved in the school. However, whether it was replacing the musty posters and other paraphernalia from the teacher who had had the classroom the year before (and had died over the summer), or trying to figure out where her kids were in reading or math, she was, she says, "hopelessly lost, with no support. . . . I had no idea what I was doing or how they were doing."

As Usdin got to know the children, she found that many couldn't even read "sight words"—the simplest, beginning words, like *the* or *and* or *but*. Yet no one in the school had any idea how badly they were doing. The one time a supervisor came to observe Usdin, she slipped Usdin a note with smiley faces all over it, saying the rookie teacher was "fabulous."

The praise only unsettled her more. "I went home every night in the first weeks," Usdin recalls, "and cried."

She was helped by a hurricane that hit Baton Rouge early in the school year. It closed the school and gave her time to regroup and rethink what she was doing.

Usdin discovered her own tricks. She found that if her students listened to taped books while they read along, it helped them learn to read. So she bought taping equipment and read books into it at night, then brought the recorders to class.

By the end of the year, Usdin had been voted "teacher of the year."

"It was more about my hard work and the parents' enthusiasm for me than any measure of what I had accomplished," she says. "Because there were no measures."

That summer she read more than two hundred books into the tape machine. But when she got back to school that fall, she was told that she had been "surplused." Baton Rouge had been forced to lay off teachers, and under the seniority-based rules of last in/first out (LIFO), the most junior teachers were the ones who had to go,

"teacher of the year" or not. The students and parents staged a sit-in to keep Usdin from being dismissed. But rules were rules.

Usdin was transferred to a school in a rougher, poorer neighborhood. Yet she thrived there because she quickly put herself under the tutelage of a veteran teacher who was a relentless master of her craft. This teacher, another union member, would have unofficial tutoring sessions before school and drive out into the neighborhood after school and on weekends to pick up students for field trips and study sessions at her house, all on her own time and none of it contemplated in her contract. Usdin followed suit and loved it so much that she stayed an extra year beyond the TFA two-year commitment.

In fact, she never left Louisiana. After that third year she became the executive director of the expanding TFA program in the state. Ten years later, when Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Usdin would become the point person in replacing the city's failing schools and school system with a portfolio of charter schools and public schools taken over by the state, many of which would be run by other TFA alumni.

Michael Johnston

About five years after Rhee's, Levin's, and Usdin's baptisms, in 1998, a thin, fair-haired Yale soccer player, whose father owned a bar in Vail, Colorado, made the same kind of breakthrough at a violence-riddled high school in Greenville, Mississippi, one of the country's highest-poverty rural areas.

Michael Johnston used chess lessons, intense one-on-one tutorials, constant supplies of popular magazines for his reading classes, and connections that he made coaching track to overcome the mayhem that prevailed during his initial months teaching high school. He refused to go easy on indifferent students whose circumstances he sympathized with or who threatened his physical safety if he gave them failing grades. He ended up tutoring many of them for college admissions exams they had never dreamed of taking.

Johnston had mentored teenagers in a New Haven housing project while at Yale, so joining TFA had not been a spur-of-the-

moment decision. He had been thinking about teaching since high school. When Johnston saw he was succeeding but was then brushed off when he suggested changes the high school might make to replicate his success, he decided to go to the Kennedy School at Harvard (and then to Yale Law School) so he could get into politics and try to fix education from the outside.

The epiphany that they could teach that was shared by Jessica Reid, Michelle Rhee, Dave Levin, Sarah Usdin, and Michael Johnston came in three stages. First, they failed in the classroom. But because they weren't used to failure—in fact, typically because they hadn't failed yet at anything in their lives—they kept trying, slogging through one approach after another to connect with their kids. Then one day, the second stage came: They realized that they were succeeding—and that these children could learn and perform.

Whereupon came the third stage and the truly important realization that would propel them and others like them through the narrative that would become the story of today's education reform revolution: What they had achieved in their classrooms wasn't magic and they were not magicians. Yes, they had to have talent. Not everyone could do this. But what was equally important was that they were willing to do whatever it took to connect, because they assumed that they could. They would work extra hours, constantly take stock of what was working, incessantly look for help from other effective teachers, make up word games, buy supplies from Staples that the school didn't have, insist on making eye contact, hold everyone to high grammatical standards even for an offhand classroom comment. As Reid's mother had observed, they would "never sit down."

Yet what was depressing to Reid as she made progress in the Bronx in the 2004–2005 school year, and to Rhee in Baltimore, Levin in Houston, Usdin in Louisiana, and Johnston in Mississippi, was that what they did in their classrooms probably didn't matter in the long run. Sure, Reid had kids in the fifth grade who had come in reading at first- or second-grade level and maybe she was getting them some of the way to where they belonged, or in some cases even all the way. So what? The next year they were going to be thrown back into the same failure factory. For her and the others, that became intolerable.

• • •

That they each saw failure all around was no surprise. American public schools are so consistently failing that on the same day in 2010 that I watched Jessica Reid promise her students she would do anything to get them to write well (while the teacher on the other side of the building bellowed on about the days of the week), a new study was released by the International Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reporting that American children ranked fifteenth in reading literacy, twenty-fifth in math achievement, and seventeenth in science among the world's developed nations. In an increasingly knowledge-based, global economy, we're not just behind—way behind—countries like China, South Korea, and Japan, whose educated masses our media typically depict as threatening our competitiveness. We're also behind Estonia, Slovenia, Poland, Norway, New Zealand, Canada, and the Netherlands.

Today, more than a quarter of young people who take the low-level baseline language and math test to enlist in our military fail it, and they have to have high school diplomas even to take it. More than a quarter of our children don't graduate from high school, a rate that is worse than and continuing to fall behind that of any other country we think of ourselves as competing with on the global stage.

And our minorities and the poor rank so far below the low national average that they're basically at or near the bottom among the developed countries.

Yet even accounting for inflation, we've more than doubled what we spend on education per student in the last thirty years, in large part to reduce class size by hiring hundreds of thousands more teachers. We are now spending about 50 percent more per student than what other developed nations spend (and about 60 percent more than South Korea, for example), while our children continue to stagnate or fall farther behind.

That's why people like Jon Schnur had come to believe that it's not about more resources. It's about creating school systems where the adults never sit down.

My introduction to the idea that turning around our schools was less about resources and more about not sitting down came on June 5, 2009. That morning I toured a windowless room in a shabby Manhattan office building, as I began work on an article for the

New Yorker about the New York City school system. An unshaven man who looked to be about fifty years old was parked in a folding chair, his head down on a card table in front of him. Next to him was an alarm clock meant "to wake him up when it's 3:15 and time for us to go home," explained a woman sitting next to him. She was knitting.

There were fifteen people in the room. Three others were also asleep, their heads lying on another card table. Three were playing a board game. The rest stood around chatting, although two were arguing over one of the folding chairs.

They were all New York City schoolteachers who had been sent to what was officially called a Department of Education Temporary Reassignment Center but which everyone called the Rubber Room. They were all getting paid their full salaries and accruing increasing pension benefits every day.

These fifteen teachers doing time that day were joined by about six hundred others in six larger Rubber Rooms spread across four of the city's five boroughs. In the largest Rubber Room, in Brooklyn, a poster declared BELIEVE IN YOURSELF as its "mission statement."

All these teachers had been accused either of misconduct, such as hitting or molesting a student, or, in some cases, of incompetence, in a system that rarely called anyone incompetent.

They had been in the Rubber Room for an average of three years, doing the same thing every day—nothing. The fifteen in this Manhattan branch were watched over by two private security guards and two city Department of Education supervisors. They punched in on a time clock for the same hours that they would have kept at school. Like all teachers, they had the summer off. The city's contract with the United Federation of Teachers required that charges against them be heard by an arbitrator, and until the charges were resolved—in a process that typically took three to five years and rarely resulted in dismissals—they continued to draw their salaries and accrue pensions and other benefits.

"You can never appreciate how irrational the system is until you've lived with it," New York City schools chancellor Joel Klein told me later that afternoon. I soon found out that the system Klein had to contend with was not unique. Teacher tenure laws from Los Angeles to Detroit to Chicago to Newark (where it can take five

years of hearings and litigation to remove a tenured teacher) all had become so impregnable that teachers across the country charged with this kind of over-the-top incompetence or misconduct were kept on the payroll for years while they reported to designated school offices, stayed home, or were allowed to remain in their classrooms.

That was my introduction not only to this Rubber Room but also to the metaphorical rubber room that had become America's public education system. America's classrooms, too, had largely become places that protect the adults who run them and assume that the children, like those sleeping teachers accused of incompetence, can only be warehoused—that, absent some fairy godfather philanthropy lifting them off to some leafy private school, they were doomed. Nothing and nobody—certainly not any teacher, however energetic—could stand them up.

Except that Jon Schnur, Jessica Reid, Michelle Rhee, Dave Levin, Michael Johnston, Joel Klein, and thousands like them—teachers, policy wonks, idealistic Ivy Leaguers, billionaire philanthropists and hedge-fund operators, a new breed of Democratic politicians (including the newly elected president), and an old breed of Republicans—were too stubborn to accept that. They wouldn't sit down.

As they have gained in numbers and as their efforts snowballed—and as the starter's pistol launched Obama's Race to the Top—a battle erupted that will determine the fate of the children on both sides of that building on Lenox Avenue and in schools across the country.

They're up against the most lavishly funded and entrenched bureaucracies in America (fourteen thousand school districts) supported by an interest group—the teachers' unions—which, the reformers complained, had money and playbooks every bit as effective in thwarting the public interest as Big Oil, the NRA, or Big Tobacco.

But teachers are not cigarette peddlers. Most really want to reach kids as much as Jessica Reid does. And most, according to polls done of teachers and my own interviews, aren't heavily involved in their unions' work. In fact, many have become indifferent to, or even embarrassed by, the positions their unions have come to stand for. The war over our schools arguably has not two but three camps:

the reformers, the unions, and the teachers. And as in any complicated, long-lasting battle, each side is subdivided into all kinds of factions, based on substantive issues or personal rivalries.

Besides, effective teaching is about much more than eliminating union rule. Nor are union leaders always the villains that their hard-line rhetoric and the deadening contracts they have insisted on would suggest.

The story of how our schools became obstacles to the American dream, and today's fierce battle to turn them around, is more complicated than that. It starts with why teachers needed a union in the first place.

"Be Obedient. Be Good.
Keep Your Mouth Shut."

January 1953, East Harlem, New York

The week in January 1953 that Albert Shanker began teaching math at an elementary school in East Harlem, he was ordered by the principal to spend his lunch hour at the supermarket across the street to prevent the children from shoplifting candy.

Shanker, whose father made a living delivering newspapers in Queens, had just dropped out of the PhD program at Columbia University. He had completed all of his course work, yet despite being as intellectually ambitious and accomplished as his pursuit of a philosophy degree (and his gangling, bespectacled appearance) suggested, he had run out of money and patience before finishing his doctoral thesis.

So, at twenty-four, Shanker took a job as a substitute teacher in East Harlem. Philosophy's loss was the labor movement's gain. Shanker would become the galvanizing force behind the unionization of teachers in New York and across the country. By the end of the twentieth century, education reformers would argue that teachers had gained too much control over public education. But through the middle of the century, that pendulum of power was far over on the opposite side. Al Shanker would become the heavy in shoving it the other way.

Shanker joined a workforce whose wages, working conditions, and general stature had never matched the idealized role teachers played in nurturing America's children since free public education had become a core community undertaking, beginning in the 1800s. Shanker was earning \$2,600 a year, or \$52 a week, in 1953. Men washing cars in parking garages had just won a contract giving them \$72. And New York's teacher salaries were higher than those in most other cities.

In the earlier part of the century, teaching had paid comparatively well, especially in the Depression era, when the security and stability of a teacher's wage were something to be envied. However, in the period following World War II, as inflation in the postwar boom hurt the purchasing power of those with relatively stable salaries, teachers began falling behind.

Worse than low pay for people like Shanker was how they were treated. They didn't think of themselves as factory workers, nor presumably did the parents who entrusted their children to them. Yet they punched time clocks, left when the last-period class bell rang, and were expected not to question the bosses or make any other waves.

It all amounted to a lopsided imbalance of power that expressed itself in all kinds of rules that seem as hard to believe in retrospect as the old Jim Crow "white"/"colored" water fountains. In Washington, D.C., teachers were not allowed to contact anyone in Congress (which controlled the District of Columbia education budget) without getting permission, in writing, from the school board. In Chicago, there was a rule against "teacher-mothers," and teachers were laid off in waves during the Great Depression while the patronage jobs of school clerks and custodians were protected.

Until 1937 in New York, ostensibly to avoid having to explain the birds and the bees to children, female teachers had to take a mandatory two-year maternity leave as soon as they realized they were pregnant. In most states even until the 1970s, when the Supreme Court ruled it illegal in an Iowa case, teachers were forced to stay home at least a few months before giving birth, usually unpaid.

Earlier in the twentieth century, many school systems prohibited women from teaching even after they had given birth. "A married woman's proper sphere is in the home if she has a family," the head of New York City's Board of Education ruled in 1911, a policy that was attacked three years later in a commentary by women's rights activist Margaret Sanger after New York's highest court upheld the rule.

Communist witch hunts were common through the 1950s. Even talking about communism in a social studies class could result in a parent's reporting a teacher, who might then be fired. In Washington, in order to get their paychecks, teachers had to sign what

became known as red rider statements every two weeks; in these statements they declared that they had not discussed communism.

Everywhere, teachers were subject to the whims of principals often as tyrannical as the worst stereotype of an old-time factory boss. They were willing and able to fire or make life miserable for teachers who questioned the curriculum, didn't want to take on an extracurricular assignment, or gave a low grade to the child of a favored parent.

Beginning in 1913, there had been a law in New York State guaranteeing teachers that they could not be dismissed as long as they provided what the law called "competent and efficient service" and "good behavior." These and similar tenure laws in other states—enacted as good government measures to end the firing or hiring of teachers whenever a new mayor or other official overseeing the schools took over—succeeded in eliminating most of that kind of obvious patronage. (The first such law was New Jersey's, in 1909.) However, they were easily circumvented by principals who wanted to get rid of teachers they didn't like, typically under the rubric of charges such as "conduct unbecoming of a teacher." There were no rules attached to these tenure laws to provide an outside, objective judgment about whether the charges were justified, and the local education board typically rubber-stamped the principal's decisions.

As Shanker told his definitive biographer, Richard Kahlenberg (from whom much of this account of his early teaching days is taken), "The message . . . was, 'Be good. Be obedient. Keep your mouth shut. Don't rock the boat. Don't do anything against the administration. Behave.'"

Sexism played a key role in undercutting teachers' status. At least until the 1970s, teaching was among the few professions that were open to women, and it was treated like a women's profession. Taking care of children was seen as a woman's job and something that women who went to college could use their educations for without barging into white-collar offices. The required hours and summers off fit with the idea that women could teach while still taking care of their own children (once those with families were allowed to fill teaching jobs, when schools became so crowded with baby boomers in the postwar period that the rules had to be changed to recruit more teachers).

In short, teachers could be underpaid and treated badly because they were viewed as women likely to be working only until they found a man to marry, or women supplementing the family income provided by their husbands—or because they were men doing a woman's job.

Albert Shanker was determined to change that. He wanted to make teaching a respected, well-paid profession for everyone.

June 11, 1962, New York City Board of Education, Brooklyn

The contract, signed on June 11, 1962, by the Board of Education and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), where Shanker had by this time become a vice president and lead organizer, had been more than fifty years in the making.

Across the country, public employees had not even been allowed to organize and bargain collectively until a law was passed in 1959 allowing Wisconsin workers to do so.

Through the first half of the century, to the extent that teachers in New York and most other cities had organized unions or guilds at all, they were splintered into innumerable groups: kindergarten and elementary school teachers, high school teachers, shop teachers, teachers who were socialists, or communists, or conservatives who didn't even want to call themselves anything other than a professional association. (Many of these would ultimately become the National Education Association [NEA] which, ironically, would become a much harder-line national union by the end of the century than its rival national group, the American Federation of Teachers, which would be led by Shanker and then Randi Weingarten.)

Beginning in the late 1950s, a group in New York that included Shanker had forged the city's various groups into one United Federation of Teachers. In 1960, they threatened the first citywide teachers' strike, seeking higher wages and limits on class size, plus the right to bargain collectively in the first place—which the city and state had refused them. Shanker and his group picked an in-your-face date for the strike: November 7, the day that John Kennedy faced Richard Nixon in the presidential election.

At the time, New York law dictated that any public employee

who went on strike would be fired. Shanker and his group reasoned that New York, which was run by Democrats, would not risk the embarrassment of the teachers' going out on strike on Election Day. Besides, how could the city's Democratic mayor, Robert Wagner Jr.—whose father had been the senator from New York who wrote the National Labor Relations Act (called the Wagner Act) in 1936—allow himself to be the one to break a union, let alone a union of people who were teaching his city's children?

The crisis was averted at the last hour when Wagner agreed to appoint a commission to study whether the teachers should be allowed to form a union and bargain with the city and, if so, how their grievances might be addressed.

The union's cause was boosted in early 1961, when President Kennedy repaid his union supporters with an executive order allowing federal employees to form unions. However, Wagner's commission delayed acting and didn't even allow the teachers to vote on whether they wanted to bargain as a group until December. When the vote came in overwhelmingly in favor of a union, the Board of Education refused during months of negotiations to agree to the union's demands. The UFT went on strike in April 1962, and within days the board agreed to most of its demands, while also agreeing to ignore the law requiring strikers to be fired.

So in June the first contract was signed, giving teachers a starting salary of \$5,300. This was more than double what Shanker had been paid nine years earlier. The contract—which, among other provisions, allowed union dues to be deducted automatically from every teacher's paycheck and paid teachers in charge of sports teams or orchestras \$11.75 extra for each session they worked—was thirty-nine pages. Except in special circumstances, the contract guaranteed a duty-free lunch period for every teacher, and added \$2 million to the budget to initiate a program to hire school aides in order to relieve teachers of hall patrols and lunchroom supervision "to the extent possible." These were all chores Shanker and his colleagues hated.

This first contract, which was to last for two years, would be replaced by increasingly better, longer ones, as the union gained strength. Three years later, the 1965 contract, now seventy-five pages, boosted starting salaries 30 percent, guaranteed every

teacher that duty-free lunch period with no exceptions, and banned hall patrols and lunchroom duties except in special circumstances. Four years after that, the 1969 contract, now 111 pages, absolutely banned those chores, imposed other restrictions on teachers' duties, and stipulated a starting salary of \$10,950, more than double the teachers' 1962 pay. The most senior teachers could now make \$16,950, up 77 percent from 1962.

By 2007, the contract would be 167 pages and full of restrictions on hours and other working conditions, and the starting salary would be \$45,530, or more than eight times 1962's \$5,300.

Through the 1960s, Shanker, who became president of the UFT in 1964, pushed his union beyond meat-and-potatoes concerns into a leadership role across a broad range of social justice issues, particularly in the area of civil rights. He led union members to the South to support desegregation sit-ins and marches, often at great personal risk. When liberal Republican John Lindsay took office in 1966, the union overcame a different kind of challenge, which earned it the enmity of many in the civil rights community but dramatically added to its political clout.

Lindsay had responded to the concerns of minority groups about the terrible state of the schools in New York's ghettos by backing the recommendation of an independent group of civic leaders that the city's mammoth school system be decentralized so that minority communities could control their schools. The idea was that more input from local parents into their schools, including who was hired to teach there, would yield better results than what the citywide bureaucracy was producing. But community control was seized as a tool by more militant civil rights leaders, and the decentralization reform idea was catapulted into a call for minorities to replace the mostly white (and mostly Jewish) teachers in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, an impoverished Brooklyn neighborhood that had been picked as the guinea pig for decentralization.

One morning in May 1968, all eighteen white teachers in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district were summarily fired. Months of near-violent confrontations ensued, including a series of long, bitter strikes, accompanied by anti-Semitic leafleting and newspaper ads from those pushing for community control. The rancor was so bad—and sympathy for those leading the attack on Shanker and the union was so widespread in New York's liberal community—

that, as Shanker's biographer Kahlenberg noted, when Woody Allen produced his 1973 comedy *Sleeper*, he elicited knowing laughs from theatergoers when the lead character woke up after a two-hundred-year sleep to learn that civilization had been destroyed when "a man by the name of Albert Shanker got hold of a nuclear warhead."

Ocean Hill-Brownsville eroded Shanker's and the union's standing in those circles for a decade. Yet the way the fight was settled more than made up for that by strengthening the union's political power and teaching Shanker and his people that they needed always to be poised to use it.

A watered-down version of Mayor Lindsay's push for decentralization was codified by a state law passed as part of a compromise with the union and the civil rights groups. The law established twenty-seven school districts across the city, with district superintendents to be elected by residents in each community. The superintendents would have power over some aspects of school locations, school curricula, teacher placement, and the like, but they would not have the authority to hire or fire teachers or principals, or negotiate contracts. That was left to the Board of Education, some of whose members were appointed by the mayor, while others were appointed by other elected officials. The result was a power vacuum. No one was singly responsible for the performance of the school system or for any school. Everyone could blame everyone else.

Into that vacuum stepped the teachers' union. Shanker's troops were united, disciplined, and ready and able to dispute anything going on at any given school. They were also organized and uniquely motivated to get out the vote in those low-voter-turnout elections for school district leaders, as well as get out the vote for the officials who appointed the education board members.

By 1969, Shanker was calling for a four-day, twenty-class-period teacher workweek (with teacher aides, organized by the union, to be hired to fill in the fifth day) and a class-size limit of twenty students. He didn't get the four days, but he did get limits on class size that began that year at twenty-five in elementary schools and gradually came down in later contracts, which forced education budgets up and severely limited the principals' ability to deploy their staffs.

Shanker—who had learned from Ocean Hill-Brownsville how much politicians could help his cause if he was willing to use the

muscle and the money of what was now the state's largest union—also got the state legislature in Albany to address the vague standards around tenure protection that had allowed principals from his teaching days to fire those they didn't like for "conduct unbecoming a teacher." A new law now required not only that "tenured teachers and administrators have the right to retain their positions as long as they exhibit good behavior and competent and efficient service," but also that they "may be discharged or otherwise disciplined" only through a laborious third-party arbitration process where the standard of proof for school systems seeking dismissals would in practice be almost equivalent to that of a criminal trial. Once in the hands of a growing corps of aggressive union-paid lawyers, it would be that law that would metastasize into the Kafkaesque process that produced the Rubber Rooms forty years later, when an aggressive school system chief, Joel Klein, tried to remove incompetent or misbehaving teachers.

Meanwhile, pension benefits were increasing faster than salaries, creating a time bomb of liability that was largely invisible. Who in the press, let alone the public, paid attention to hard-to-fathom payout formulas that wouldn't come due for years? The structure of the pensions also created a perverse set of incentives. They were lavish once paid (typically 40–60 percent of the final year's salary, depending on years of service), but they didn't pay much until a teacher had taught for twenty or twenty-five years. Unlike today's standard 401(k) plans, the money set aside was not portable if a teacher left early in his or her career. With this all-or-nothing structure, even the most burned-out, diffident, or incompetent teachers would stay put once they got close to twenty or twenty-five years—and they could do so with impunity now that the new tenure rules made it almost impossible to remove those simply hanging on.

Across the country, much the same thing was happening. Salaries were increasing rapidly, and, given the low level of compensation for such important work, these increases were hard to argue against. Pensions were increasing even faster, with arcane tweaks piling up to wreak financial havoc decades later. In Missouri, for example, the unions got a law passed in the state legislature that added the value of health insurance to the calculation of what the teacher's final-year "salary" was, against which the lifelong pension was computed.

Work rules, which started as protections against such obvious abuses as teachers' not having a lunch break, were increasingly chipping away a principal's ability to run a good school, a problem exacerbated by proliferating contract clauses requiring elaborate grievance procedures whenever a teacher had a complaint about something a principal was doing that arguably tested the limits of the rules.

As in New York and similarly in the name of reform, management control over most large school systems was being truncated at the same time that the unions were getting stronger. School "reform" typically meant keeping direct responsibility away from elected officials, such as a mayor or county executive. The idea was to prevent patronage or other meddling, while letting the nonpartisan "experts" on a board of education handle things.

Thus, no one politician cared enough (because the voters were unlikely to blame a politician) to cross the one interest group—the teachers—that did care enough to get down in the weeds on work rules or grievance procedures, or push for tweaks in a pension formula. It wasn't really the politicians' school system and it certainly wasn't their money. Why fight too hard and risk a strike?

Moreover, much of the fundamental dynamic in labor-management relations—an adversarial process—was largely absent when it came to politicians negotiating with public employee unions, let alone with the union that was fast becoming the largest, richest, and most politically powerful union in the country. Through the 1970s, teachers were emerging nationally as political kingmakers, especially in Democratic politics. This was particularly true at the local level, where they could staff phones, hand out literature, and volunteer to get out the vote in low-turnout elections or primaries.

In other words, in Democratic strongholds, teachers could pretty much decide the fate on Election Day or Primary Day of the local officials who negotiated their contracts. Whatever else one might say, for example, about management's failure of will in handling labor relations in the auto industry, at least the bosses weren't sitting across the table from the people who might be responsible in large part for hiring or firing them.

The power of the teachers' unions in Democratic politics was

accelerated beginning in the 1970s by factors beyond the teachers' escalating success across the country in organizing still more teachers and getting them good contracts—which in turn produced a cascading flow of dues, typically at a rate of 1–2 percent of each teacher's rapidly increasing salary. As the country's manufacturing sector, particularly in industries such as steel and automobiles, declined, overall unionization in the private sector declined, too. In 1960, about 35 percent of all private-sector workers were members of a union. By the turn of the twenty-first century, private-sector unionization had declined to about 7 percent. Union membership in public-sector jobs was about 35 percent.

Thus, the two national teachers' unions—the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers—became an increasingly dominant sector of organized labor. In 1960, teachers represented about 3 percent of unionized workers; by 1980, they represented 15 percent, and by 2009, 25 percent. If unions were the base of the Democratic Party, teachers were the base of the base, especially after the country's then-largest union—the Teamsters—defected to the Republicans when Richard Nixon granted clemency and a prison release to corrupt Teamsters leader Jimmy Hoffa in 1971.

In 1973, Shanker moved to reinforce that political power, creating at what by then had become his Washington-based American Federation of Teachers an organization called COPE, for Committee on Political Education. As he had done with a New York COPE organized within his local UFT, the national COPE asked all members to contribute a relatively small sum (\$25 at the beginning) that when multiplied by what was then approaching 400,000 members would become a major war chest for campaign contributions. It would quickly become 1.3 million members asked to chip in \$45.

Contributions were solicited aggressively, almost as an obligation, by union representatives in every school. They stressed that the money was needed to help elect politicians who supported generous education budgets or union-friendly laws related to pensions, seniority systems, tenure, or even, as with Ocean Hill–Brownsville, laws related to school system governance. More than 90 percent of the members contributed. Regular dues, which in the 1970s were \$100 to \$200 per teacher and would grow to an average of over \$500

per teacher by 2000 (split between the local and the national organization), could be used for lobbying and other political activities, and the COPE war chest would supplement that with campaign contributions in federal, state, and local elections.

By September 1973, the *New York Times's* legendary labor reporter A. H. Raskin, citing the influence Shanker had gained from the Ocean Hill–Brownsville wars and the power vacuum that he had filled afterward, declared Shanker to be the most politically influential union leader in the country, ahead of such kingmakers as the AFL–CIO's George Meany. The same article quoted a foe of Shanker's from the Ocean Hill–Brownsville fight as saying, "The only honest thing to do would be to designate Shanker as [Schools] Chancellor."

The NEA soon followed suit with its own, larger political war chest.

Thus, by the mid-1970s, teachers, through their unions, had dominant leverage over the growing bureaucracies that controlled public education. This created a dynamic in which the union leaders and the bureaucrats were naturally inclined to find ways to coexist by worrying more about the adults than the children. Combined with other social forces sweeping through the country—not the least of which was the fact that women were now enjoying far broader career opportunities—it was not a recipe for effective, accountable schooling.

Fewer than ten years later, a presidential commission would issue a dismaying report declaring exactly that and spelling out the damage.

"If an Unfriendly Foreign Power Had Attempted . . ."

April 26, 1983, the White House

President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education was expected to issue one of those long, soon-to-gather-dust reports, the highlights of which would be a call to restore prayer in public schools, to allow for the dismemberment of public education by giving parents government vouchers with which they could pay to send their children to a private school of their choice, and maybe even to dismantle the federal Department of Education, which had been created four years earlier by President Jimmy Carter. At least, that's what President Reagan had hoped.

Instead, the commission, chaired by University of California president David Gardner, presented on April 26, 1983, a thirty-three-page manifesto that deplored the state of public education. "Our Nation is at risk," the report's opening paragraph began, and continued with a warning that sounded like what President Obama would be saying twenty-five years later: "Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. . . . We report to the American people that . . . the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people."

"If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might have viewed it as an act of war," the report continued, using rhetoric that was unheard of for a commission white paper like this, and that some scholars later criticized as hyperbole.

Supplying a horde of disheartening statistics—"average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is now lower than 26 years ago when Sputnik was launched," and 40 per-

cent of seventeen-year-olds "cannot draw inferences from written material," while "remedial mathematics courses in public 4-year colleges . . . now constitute one-quarter of all mathematics courses taught in those institutions"—the report declared, "We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament."

The commission recommended a variety of fixes, including more federal aid to schools in impoverished communities, the setting of curricula standards (twelve years of math, three years of science, and one year of computer science), standardized tests to measure student progress, and lengthening the school day and school year. As for teachers, the commission recommended that they be better compensated but that they also be certified for competence in the subject they were teaching and that "salary, promotion, tenure, and retention decisions should be tied to an effective evaluation system that includes peer review so that superior teachers can be rewarded, average ones encouraged, and poor ones either improved or terminated."

The crisis the commission identified had to do with more than how school systems had become leaderless bureaucracies where no one was responsible, or how teachers' union contracts blocked the performance-based evaluations or the longer workdays and school years the commission recommended.

For starters, the building of the interstate highways system in the 1950s and the resulting growth of the suburbs had enabled the haves to separate more easily from the have-nots in the cities, as did the increase in private schools, both of which lessened the political pressure on large school systems to perform.

Worse still for public education was the accelerating end by the 1980s of what had otherwise been a national black eye: job discrimination against women and minorities. Until the 1970s, one of the only professions easily open to women and minorities was public education—not law, medicine, engineering, or much of anything else, all of which pay much more than teaching.

Anyone who went to school in the 1950s or '60s knows this. My best reading teacher at the elementary school I attended in Queens, New York, lived two blocks away with her husband and children (one of whom was in my class). Twenty years later, she could have

been a lawyer, like her husband. It's unlikely she instead would have chosen work in what had become a large bureaucracy that featured mind-numbing contracts, thousands of pages of school district rules, and, yes, ironclad job security and a great pension but low pay (for a profession) and incentive-less lockstep compensation based only on seniority or whether she had some kind of extra graduate degree. By 1983, the people more inclined to want that kind of risk-free paycheck were a different talent pool.

"Too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students," the commission found. It was a trend that would continue to accelerate in the three decades following the report, so much so that in 2010 a study by the McKinsey consulting firm would report that just 23 percent of new teachers came from the top third of their college graduating classes (with a large portion of those being Teach For America recruits), while the world's top-performing school systems—those of South Korea, Singapore, and Finland—recruited nearly 100 percent from that upper end.

Klein recalls that when he took over the New York City schools in 2002, he was immediately struck by this generational talent shortfall, which made giving near-total job security, through tenure, to what by then were senior teachers that much more of a problem. "We had," says Klein, "a whole generation of older teachers where some significant portion of them were not what you would call high achievers."

In other words, Randi Weingarten's mother, assuming she was as smart and ambitious as her doctor and lawyer daughters, would have been more likely a generation later to follow one of her daughters' paths. While Weingarten says she thinks of her mother when she thinks of her job defending those 167-page contracts, she is not nearly as likely today to be defending people with her mother's talent and drive. There are still thousands of skilled, highly motivated teachers in America's classrooms, most of whom, polls show, aren't active in their union and don't worry much about how the small print in their contracts protects them. Yet they have been increasingly joined by a different group who approach the 8:00-a.m.-to-3:15-p.m. workday with a civil service mentality. And if, as principal Kayrol Burgess-Harper in Harlem has found in the half

of the building she shares with Jessica Reid's school, they make up a fourth or even a third of the teaching corps, they can set back the mission of the entire school. They resist change. They undercut the school's overall environment. And they can reverse the progress a child might have made with an effective teacher the year before.

To be sure, public schools were never the great equalizers in the 1940s and 1950s that they might seem to have been in retrospect. In those days, they assiduously tracked students, steering some into higher education that would give them white-collar jobs but steering more along tracks that would send them out into blue-collar jobs requiring limited academic skills. The problem was that in the post-Sputnik era, as the report *A Nation At Risk* called it, increasingly more jobs required more learning. That trend would accelerate in the last half of the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, when our schools would be challenged to produce "knowledge workers" to compete globally. So the finding that America's children were falling behind in 1983 was destined to become even more of a crisis in the years ahead. The schools would need to do more at the same time that all of these forces were combining to have them produce less.

President Reagan was so disappointed with the commission's alarming report—urging increased federal aid to education and federally encouraged curricula and teaching standards, rather than school prayer, vouchers, and a general retreat from federal involvement in K-12 education—that he almost didn't allow the commissioners to present their paper to him at a planned Rose Garden press conference. However, because the event had already been announced, he let the show go on. And because the report then got so much press attention, he soon began at least talking about the need for a greater federal role in advancing local solutions.

The local solutions that Reagan favored had been ingrained in the tradition of American education since schoolhouses had been opened spontaneously by local churches and civic groups in the early 1800s. It wasn't until the end of that century that even the states became significantly involved in schooling.

By the time of the Reagan press conference, that localized structure had become what education policy wonks liked to refer to as

the "50/14,000/130,000" dilemma when it came to moving the nation in any direction education-wise: There were 50 states. There were about 14,000 school districts, most with their own union contracts by then and all resisting state intrusion. And there were about 130,000 K-12 public and private schools, most of which had their own curricula or rules for the classrooms in their buildings.

"You Gonna Put a Horse Head in My Bed?"

December 1984, Washington, D.C.

Brooklyn-born and Harvard Law-educated William Bennett, who is now a prominent conservative talk show host and commentator, had been asked by President Reagan to leave his post as head of the National Endowment for the Arts and become Reagan's second secretary of education. Because *A Nation At Risk* had made Reagan's original goal of dismantling the Education Department untenable in the short term, it seemed time to replace the administration's quiet, caretaker-like first education secretary with someone who would be more of an activist, although in a way that kept faith with conservative values.

Just after he was appointed, Bennett says, he received a visit from a National Education Association delegation. The NEA hadn't much worried about the Reagan administration, which had a hands-off attitude when it came to public education. Bennett, however, had promised to push for reforms in response to *A Nation At Risk*.

"We hope we will have your cooperation," one of the union leaders began after they had exchanged pleasantries. "If not, it will be unfortunate."

"Unfortunate for whom?" Bennett shot back.

"For you. You really don't want to be in a fight with us."

"Are you threatening me? You gonna put a horse head in my bed?" he asked, referring to the classic scene in *The Godfather*. "You guys are the problem," Bennett continued, building up steam, "and I'm coming after you."

I was unable find any of the NEA people who attended that 1984 meeting to corroborate Bennett's account, but it's clear that the

new secretary's relationship with the teachers' unions went downhill from there. He gave countless speeches attacking the unions as a prime cause of the decline of public education, events that were soon accompanied by union-encouraged demonstrations and often heckling.

Bennett also stepped up the publicity his department generated around a wall chart his predecessor, Terrel Bell, had prepared that ranked the states on such measures as high school graduation rates, amounts spent per student on education, and students' performance in the country's annual National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) tests. There were enough embarrassing data on the chart to infuriate most states' governors. California, for example, ranked tenth in average teacher salaries yet was third worst when it came to SAT score declines over the prior ten years, while New York ranked second worst in score declines, sixth worst in high school graduation rates, but second highest (behind only Alaska) in spending per pupil. "They hated [the scores]," Bennett says. "What they hated worse was the suggestion that we use the NAEP tests more aggressively to independently, and more reliably, evaluate student performance. State evaluations notoriously vary dramatically," he adds. "It turned out one year, by adding all the state self-evaluations together, that 80 percent of American students scored above the median. Nice work if you can get it."

Meantime, a group of mostly Southern governors—including Bill Clinton of Arkansas, Richard Riley of South Carolina (who would become President Clinton's education secretary), and Tennessee's Lamar Alexander (who would become George H. W. Bush's education secretary and then be elected to the U.S. Senate)—started to pursue a less confrontational path, seeking reforms that nibbled away at the teachers' prerogatives while not attacking the unions frontally. Clinton, with his wife, Hillary, who headed a state task force on the subject, became a champion of testing teachers for competence not only before they began teaching but at regular intervals after. In April 1985, Shanker found himself at an education conference in Chicago debating the young, relatively unknown Arkansas governor on the subject.

In Tennessee, Alexander pushed through a change in the old lockstep seniority system, adding elements of a career ladder that

could bring a teacher up to “master teacher” status based on merit. The NEA attacked the plan, declaring, “Everyone is a master teacher.”

Shanker and his AFT took a different tack. He became a reformer.

To some, certainly including Bennett, Woody Allen’s villain simply saw the handwriting on the wall: Shanker, the shrewd politician, knew that his union had to become more accommodating, or at least act more accommodating. That cynical view sells Shanker short. *A Nation At Risk* had attracted headlines for a while in 1983, but the education reform climate in the 1980s was nothing like what it would become thirty years later. It was largely a talking point for Republicans plus a few Southern Democrats. Rather, as Richard Kahlenberg argues in his biography of Shanker, it’s likely that Shanker—who had become a union activist in the first place because he hated the way teachers were not treated as professionals—really believed in reform and was embarrassed by the results public education was producing. He really believed in elevating the profession and thought that doing so would continue to allow teachers to increase their salaries and benefits and maintain their independence in the classroom.

The NEA had immediately attacked *A Nation At Risk* as an assault on teaching and public education. Shanker, who had championed the four-day workweek and resisted any talk of merit or performance pay, would have been expected to do the same. Yet, Kahlenberg wrote, when Shanker finished reading the report, he looked up at his staff and said, “This report is right, and not only that, we should say that.”

Soon, Shanker began making a series of speeches and statements in the much-read weekly column his union had purchased for him (the column ran as an ad) in the Sunday *New York Times*, saying that teachers should be open to ideas like merit pay and better evaluation systems. In one column, Shanker wrote about a report in Baltimore that found that many applying for teaching jobs were unable to write a simple letter home to parents without making obvious grammatical and spelling mistakes, yet they were hired anyway. In blunt terms that read like Michelle Rhee’s account of her Baltimore experience years later, Shanker said that no other profession would

allow “the unqualified to practice,” and that, “before we heap blame on Baltimore, we should remember that thousands of other school districts didn’t even bother to test their prospective teachers at all.”

In another speech, Shanker touted a “peer review” program initiated by the AFT local union in Toledo, Ohio, in which selected senior teachers would observe and evaluate all the teachers in a school and identify those who needed more training and even those who should be dismissed. He used another profession—law—as his analogy, describing how lawyers in local bar associations routinely discipline their own.

For those familiar with lawyer disciplinary systems—which, when not accompanied by some kind of government enforcement mechanism, are notoriously lenient in dealing with client complaints about misbehavior, let alone weeding out lawyers who are not competent—the analogy might have seemed hollow. Moreover, people using lawyers had a choice: They could hire the one they thought most competent and fire any who did not do a good job. Parents sending their children to the local public school had no such choice. Shanker had an answer for that, too. He suggested that parents be able to send their children to schools in their districts other than the closest one. More important, he suggested something called charter schools—alternative schools in local districts that would be given special authorization, or charters, to try different methods of teaching and operating. In Shanker’s view, of course, these schools would be unionized. But his embrace of choice for parents—and his overall stance that a teachers’ union had to engage in issues beyond those related to work rules, job protection, and wages—was so surprising for a union leader that the press was soon writing about him as a labor statesman.

While the NEA’s harder line won support among its members and among many groups of teachers who continued to form new locals across the country, Shanker’s stance gained the AFT traction in less traditionally union-friendly places like Texas and Tennessee (where Shanker said that the state’s proposed master teacher program “should be open for discussion”).

For a while the peer review programs in Toledo (and soon thereafter in Cincinnati and several other cities) did screen out higher percentages of new teachers before they were awarded tenure and

even resulted in the removal of more tenured teachers who were not performing. However, as the focus on *A Nation At Risk* faded, these reforms never spread and, in fact, died out. Most locals, even in Shanker's AFT, opposed them or were more focused on continuing to make advances on meat-and-potatoes collective-bargaining issues. In New York, for example, Shanker's designated successor as head of the UFT focused on using her political muscle to win a wage increase of nearly 40 percent in her 1985 three-year contract.

Most of the debate, insofar as the debate continued, was over national curriculum standards or national teacher certification standards. Movement on both issues was stalemated, however, because conservatives on the Republican side rejected almost anything that was nationally imposed, while union supporters in the Democratic Party rejected the idea of standards, despite Shanker's support, because the local unions they depended on still refused to embrace them.

One thing that did change as a result of *A Nation At Risk* was that education budgets across the country increased faster than inflation, fueled mostly by salary increases and the hiring of more teachers to reduce class size. By 1989, although the country was spending approximately two-thirds more per student than in 1983, there had been no improvement in the national student assessment scores. Everyone involved in education policy seemed to understand that American public education was broken—including an idealistic, ambitious student at Princeton.

A "Hopelessly Naïve" Thesis

April 12, 1989, Princeton, New Jersey

Wendy Kopp, a senior at Princeton University, was worried that her gruff taskmaster thesis adviser was going to fail her or send her back for a rewrite. She had handed in her paper two days before, after struggling with it for months. The professor had already called and summoned her to his office. Kopp was a serious student, the kind who immersed herself in do-gooder student activities and heavy public policy courses. As a teenager growing up in a wealthy Dallas suburb, she had always followed her teachers' instructions (though with enough panache to vault her into Princeton). She hadn't followed instructions this time.

The professor had made Kopp promise that her thesis would be an argument for a law requiring two years of national public service. But she'd become so enamored of a different idea that she'd blown that off, producing instead a proposal—which she still called an "argument," hoping it would mollify him—for a *volunteer* national teacher corps that would ease the shortage of teachers across the country.

In fact, Kopp had become so consumed by the idea that she went much farther in the 172-page paper. She included budgets and time lines for launching the program a year later. A term paper had become not just a policy manifesto but also a business plan. And a career plan.

Kopp was going to start big. Recalling how President Kennedy had launched the Peace Corps with a multicountry splash, Kopp wrote that she was going to spend \$2.5 million in the first year to deploy five hundred new teachers chosen from thousands of applicants who would be lured in a nationwide recruiting campaign as they graduated from the country's best colleges. She was going to train them at a "summer institute," then send them out to six